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Kahn, Otto Hermann

Art and the people

New York

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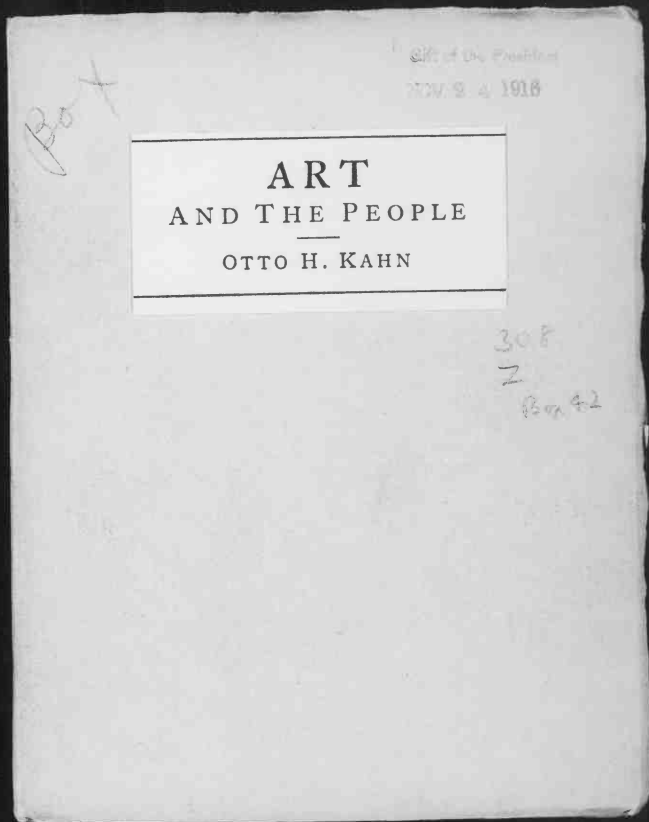
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ART AND THE PEOPLE

BY
OTTO H. KAHN

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Remarks
by
Otto H. Kahn
at the
Shakespeare Tercentenary
Celebration Dinner
In New York City
May 4, 1916

ART AND THE PEOPLE

IN giving you greeting and bidding you welcome, may I say that it is a particular gratification to me to see amongst you so many whom I had not known hitherto, or had only known by reputation or by sight. I trust my old friends will not consider this a left-handed compliment. I am happy indeed to see them here. But the opportunity to make new friends, to rub shoulders and exchange thoughts with people outside of one's accustomed circle, is all too rare in this huge, rushing city.

It is one of the greatest drawbacks of life in New York, that the people in the various walks of life do not sufficiently come into contact with each other.

We New Yorkers do not mix enough. We men and women of different occupations, professions and viewpoints ought to meet far more frequently, we ought to get to know one another far better, and thus demonstrate to one another that none of us, neither Wall Street men nor Socialists, have claws or hoofs; that we are all made of the same basic stuff, affected by the same joys and sorrows and responsive to pretty much the same appeal.

We ought to seek and emphasize, far more than we are doing, that which unites us instead of searching out and accentuating and indeed exaggerating that which separates us.

Amongst the common meeting grounds available, one of the most appropriate is that of art. For art is democracy, art is equality of opportunity. Not the false democracy which, misunderstanding or misinterpreting the purpose and meaning of the democratic conception, seeks or tends to establish a common level of

mediocrity, but the true democracy which, guided by the star of the ideal and firm in its faith, strives to lead us all onward and upward to an ever higher plane.

And the people are willing to be so led. Let me say in parenthesis that when I say "the people," I do not use the term with the somewhat patronizing inflection that is sometimes imparted to it, rather implying that the speaker refers to a thing apart from himself. I refer to you and to me no less than to the butcher and baker and candlestick maker.

It is a constant source of wonderment to me how "the people" are underestimated by most of those who seek their votes or their patronage. Just as the average politician thinks that "the people" want to be coddled and flattered and "soft-soaped," when experience has shown that the royal road to popular success is to show courage and independence and to stand up man-fashion for one's convictions, so the average theatrical manager thinks that he

must play down to an assumed level of shallowness, when experience has shown that the greatest probability to score a hit is in aiming high.

I have an abiding faith that the people collectively know a good thing when they see it. It is true that sometimes they make the judicious grieve by taking a pretty poor thing for a good thing, but I have never known them to fail to recognize and appreciate the truly meritorious in art. In fact, I have admiringly wondered more than once at their capacity to enjoy and digest heavy and unusual artistic food, free from the salt or spice of what is ordinarily considered popular appeal.

I have never believed in the necessity or advantage of gauging theatrical offerings according to the alleged standards and requirements of the "tired business man," or, for the matter of that, woman (for women are usually just as busy, and just as tired after the day's work as are the men, only as a rule they carry their tiredness off

better and make less fuss about it). Silly, inane shows are no antidote to "that tired feeling." What both men and women, tired or idle, do want is to be genuinely moved and stirred, either to laughter or to tears, or stimulated to new thought, in short, to be lifted out of the rut and routine of their daily lives and mental atmosphere.

When the right to vote in England was thrown open to the masses of the people, a great Englishman said: "Now we must educate our masters." Yes, but education and opportunity for learning is needed not only for our masters', the people's, brains, but also for their souls and tastes.

The conditions of existence of the great majority of the people are, unfortunately, hard and wearing, but I venture to question whether as yet we use sufficiently the spiritual means at hand, and well tested in European countries, to make them less so.

We are doing as much, probably, for education as any other country, but

relatively little for recreation. And recreation of the right kind does have power literally to re-create, to re-create the wasting tissues of our souls, the worn fibres of our brains, to re-create indeed the zest and courage for life.

Art has that power beyond all other forms or means of recreation. And the people are ready to welcome art; they are hungry for nourishment for their souls, eager for outlets for their emotions. Observation and experience have thoroughly convinced me how great and beneficent an influence art can, and should, be made in their lives.

I

ART, and particularly the art of music and of the stage, is a serious and important cultural element in the life of a community. It has a weighty purpose and a great mission. It is one of the most potent factors for good, one of the three or four greatest agencies which tend to form and guide the thoughts and the sentiments and the conduct of the people.

The craving for sensations—so characteristic of our times, and particularly of our country—some of the restlessness, of the turmoil, of the lawlessness, even of the crime of the day, spring in many instances simply from a desire to get away from the

unrelieved dullness and drudgery of everyday existence.

It is very far from being generally appreciated as yet how much can be done by art, and especially by the art of the stage, to give proper satisfaction to this natural and legitimate desire, to lead the strong instinct underlying it into fruitful, instead of into harmful, or even destructive expression. It is very far from being appreciated as yet by our wealthy men that art can be as educational as universities, that it has elements which, to a great part of our population, can make it as nourishing as soup kitchens, as healing as hospitals, as stimulating as any medicinal tonic.

European governments and municipalities have long since recognized this aspect of public utility inherent in art, and have given expression to this recognition by subsidizing theatres and operas and other art institutions. Here, in accordance with the spirit and traditions of the country, this

task to the largest extent is left to private initiative, to the generosity and unselfishness, or, if you will, the enlightened selfishness of those who can afford to give. It is a duty and a privilege and ought to be a pleasure to fulfil it.

Those of us who have been favored by fortune, who sit in our offices or well appointed homes more or less satisfied with the general scheme of things and with our place in it, must and must increasingly do all we can to prove that we are conscious of the obligations which are imposed upon us by due recognition of the advantages we enjoy.

For educational and scientific purposes a vast deal has been done. The generosity displayed by many of our wealthy men in this respect is the envy and admiration of the world. But to the immensely large and immensely important field of art relatively little attention has been given thus far. Yet the opportunity is boundless and the need very great for men who will put some

of their wealth, of their time and ability in the service of this cause; who, conscious of the importance and the far-reaching influence of art, will help along in movements having for their purpose the advancement of art and of art standards and the procuring of more and better opportunities in the field of art, both to the public and to American artists. Mæcenases are needed for the dramatic stage, the operatic stage, the concert stage; for conservatories and art academies; for the encouragement and support of American writers, painters, sculptors, decorators, etc., in fact, for all those things which in Europe have been done and are being done by princes, governments and communities.

Here is a vast opportunity for cultural and helpful work. To strive toward fostering the art life of the country; toward counteracting harsh materialism, toward relieving the monotony and strain of the people's every-day life by helping to awaken in them or to foster the love and the

understanding of that which is beautiful and inspiring, and aversion and contempt for that which is vulgar, cheap and degrading, is, I think, a humanitarian effort eminently worth making, and offering, moreover, every prospect of not being attempted in vain.

II

WE all, rich and poor alike, need to be taken out of the routine and grind of our daily lives once in a while. We all of us are the better for psychic change once in a while, just as we are the better for physical change of air and surroundings. A sluggish soul needs stimulation just as much as a sluggish liver.

To feel, to appreciate, to understand the beauty of nature and of art is one of the greatest gifts that can be given to any one on his way through life. I rather think a great majority of us find it, with other gifts, in our cradle, but too many of us either do not grasp it, or, as we grow up

and face the serious business of life, deliberately throw it overboard, looking upon it as useless, or even harmful ballast in the stern and strenuous struggle for success. This is a pity and a great mistake, even from a utilitarian point of view. Just as the soil of agricultural land requires rotation of crops in order to produce the best results, so does the soil of our inner being require variety of treatment in order to remain vigorous and elastic and fertile and to enable us to produce the best we are capable of.

Wealth is only in part a matter of dollars and cents. The visitor who pays twenty-five cents for a seat at a popular concert, if he brings with him love and enthusiasm for art, will be far richer that evening than the man or woman from Fifth Avenue if he or she sits yawning in a box at the Metropolitan Opera House.

The poor man in a crowded tenement who feels moved and stirred in reading a fine book will be far richer than the man or

woman sitting in dullness in a gorgeous library. If he goes to Central Park or Riverside Drive with his eyes and soul open to the beauties of nature, he will be far richer than the man or woman chasing through the glories of Italy or France in a luxurious automobile, the man thinking of the Stock Exchange and the woman of her new dress or next party.

The late Booker T. Washington used to tell a story of his meeting a colored woman and asking her: "Well, Miranda, where are you going?" to which she responded, "I'se going nowhere, Mr. Washington, I'se been where I am going."

This country hasn't "been where it is going." A great stirring and moving is going on in the land. The old order changeth, giving place to new. Call it "the new freedom" or "my policies," or what you will, the people at large are astir groping, seeking for a condition of things which shall be better and happier, which shall give them a greater share, not only of

the comforts and material rewards, but of the joys and the recreations, the beauties and the inspirations of life. It is a movement which is full of promise, and a menace only if ignored, repressed, or falsely and selfishly led. Most of it will find expression in politics, in economic and social legislation; some of it will find expression in art.

III

I N this great country, with its vast mixture of races, all thrown into the melting pot of American traditions, climate and surroundings, there is all the raw material of a splendid artistic development. Every kind of talent is latent here. All that is required is opportunity, inspiration and guidance. And in addition we have here the best public to appeal to that exists anywhere, a public eager to learn, quick to perceive and to respond, sure to appreciate and retain; fresh, spontaneous and genuine in its feelings, clean and healthy in its artistic instincts and aspirations, not yet affected by the taint of decadence

which has begun to cast its blight upon art in some other countries.

In saying this, I do not dispute the charge frequently laid against us that our people lack as yet in discrimination and that they are not sufficiently intolerant of the meretricious in art, but these are faults of youth, and moreover essentially negative faults, curable and in process of being cured, while the virtues to which I have referred are positive in character and cumulative and progressive in effect. Admitting that our people are apt at times to follow false gods, I say, let the right god come along and they will recognize him unflinching and follow him rejoicing.

America is a much misunderstood and consequently maligned place. Its foibles, its imperfections "jump at the eye," to use a graphic French expression. Its really controlling qualities—and they are beautiful and lofty and full of promise—lie deep and are not apparent to the casual beholder. The world likes the short cut of catch

phrases, such as "the almighty dollar," and is reluctant to go to the trouble of reconsidering opinions once formed.

America in the past century had the formidable task of conquering a continent, physically and industrially, and it was necessary that the best brains, the intensest energies and activities of its people should devote themselves to that stern task of material effort, the amazing success of which was naturally measured and expressed largely in terms of dollars and cents.

But the day of the industrial pioneer is over (though vast commercial development, vast indeed beyond all imagination, still lies before us) and with it has gone—if it ever existed—the day of the almighty dollar. The day of the pioneer of culture and idealism has come, and the power of the idea is, and has always been, even in America's most materialistic days, far mightier than that of the dollar. After more than a century's stupendous effort and unparalleled—almost too rapid—

economic advance, we have reached a stage where we can afford, and ought, to occupy ourselves increasingly with questions affecting the mental, moral and psychical well-being and progress of the race.

IV

A VAST army equipped with spiritual weapons, second to those of no other nation, stands ready and impatient to follow those qualified to lead, across the tenaciously held trenches of ugliness, dullness and commercialism, to the heights beyond. America has been rightly called, by a hard-headed European observer, "the land of unlimited possibilities." He referred to the possibilities of business, but the same thing holds true of the possibilities of art. More in this country than anywhere else, is it possible to walk with one's feet on the earth and one's head in the clouds.

In the present juncture of the world's affairs many a great opportunity and a duty commensurately great lies before America. One of the greatest of such opportunities and duties is in the field of art.

When this appalling war comes to be ended, the heavy burden of reconstruction will lie upon weary and weakened Europe. Millions of the flower of its youth and manhood will have been killed or maimed. The utmost energies of the men and women of the leading European nations will have to be devoted for years to come to the hard and stern task of material effort.

In the stress and strain of the post-bellum period, the high altar on which there burns the sacred flame of art may be left for a time with but few attendants. It is America's opportunity, it is America's high privilege and duty to aid in keeping alive that sacred flame. It is her privilege and duty to open wide her portals to art and artists, to become a militant force in the cause and service of art, to be foremost

in helping to create and spread that which beautifies and enriches life, to fight and seek to destroy that which vulgarizes and lowers it.

To accomplish this great task there must be leaders—but the test of a leader is that he have followers. Those who conceived and took charge of the execution of the bold and broad plans of the Shakespeare Tercentenary Celebration have met that test. In the face of much discouragement and some scoffing, they went ahead in that simple and enthusiastic faith which has the power to move not merely mountains, but—which is harder—to overcome the inertia of New York. They—and I mean especially the women, for it is the women headed by Miss Beegle and Miss Oglebay who did much the largest and hardest part of the work—have accomplished what has never before been done in this city, they have aroused, mobilized and organized the community spirit in the cause of art.

This Tercentenary Celebration which will culminate in the production of Percy Mackaye's *Masque*, is not a "high-brow" affair, it is not a benevolent uplift movement backed by a few men and women of wealth. It stands upon a broad and deep popular base; it enlists and has significance for Avenue A no less than for Fifth Avenue; it has the enthusiastic support and active co-operation of two thousand different organizations directly representing 800,000 constituents. It is the most democratic, most comprehensive and most promising response which has ever been given in this community to the appeal of art. It demonstrates conclusively the extent and genuineness of the latent interest in and feeling and desire for art.

V

AND now that we, or rather the men and women workers of the Shakespeare Celebration Committee—for my own part has been entirely insignificant—have succeeded beyond all anticipations in calling the community spirit into action, let us seek to perpetuate it as a concrete and living force. The main purpose for which I have ventured to ask you all to this dinner-meeting, was to obtain appropriate action to that end.

Hoping that you will forgive me a somewhat Tammany-esque method of procedure for the sake of the good cause, and also for the sake of completing our program for this

evening at not too late an hour for your comfort, I have made free to prepare a resolution. In keeping with the spirit and character of this gathering, I have asked Mr. James Beck, who, apart from being a distinguished writer and orator and a profound student of Shakespeare, is a corporation lawyer and a stalwart Republican, to move it, and Mr. Morris Hillquit, a tribune of the people and a leading exponent of Socialistic doctrine, to second it. The resolution is as follows:

WHEREAS the attendance at the various Shakespeare performances during the past theatrical season and the widespread interest displayed in the Shakespeare Tercentenary Celebration have demonstrated that the people in all walks of life are ready to respond to the appeal of serious art, and

WHEREAS the Shakespeare Tercentenary Celebration Committee has succeeded in enlisting the co-operation of a great many different organizations towards an adequate expression of the community spirit in art, and

WHEREAS it appears desirable to perpetuate and enlarge such co-operation and to endeavor to give

comprehensive expression, definite aim and systematic guidance to what has heretofore been mainly indeterminate aspiration and sporadic and scattered effort,

BE IT RESOLVED THAT *the Mayor's Honorary Committee and the New York City Shakespeare Tercentenary Celebration Committee constitute themselves into a permanent organization, with power to add to their number, in order to serve the cause of art and more particularly that of the stage and of the pageant, and to foster and give expression to the community spirit and to community effort in art.*

FURTHER RESOLVED THAT *the Chairman be directed to appoint a committee for the purpose of devising ways and means to carry into effect the sense of this resolution and that such committee report its recommendations and conclusions to a joint meeting of the Mayor's Honorary Committee and the Shakespeare Tercentenary Celebration Committee, such meeting to be called by the Chairman at as early a date as practicable.*

MSH 20892

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